

VIRGINIA WILDLIFE

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2012

FOUR DOLLARS



Awaiting the Saw-whets • Safety Afield • Abrams Creek Treasures

NOVEMBER/DE



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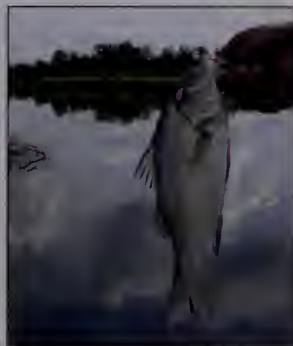
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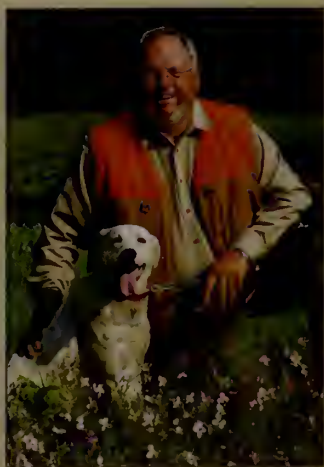
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About the cover: Mallards in flight. Story on page 10. ©John R. Ford



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BOB DUNCAN
Executive Director



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Yes, Virginia, hunting and fishing do matter—in so many different ways! Back in September, preliminary estimates from the 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation were announced and the results were encouraging. Nationally, there was an eleven percent increase in the number of anglers since publication of the previous survey in 2006, and the number of hunters rose by nine percent. In 2011, over ninety million U.S. residents (representing 38 percent of the population age 16 or older) enjoyed some form of recreational activity related to fish and wildlife. Over 37 million folks fished or hunted, and nearly 72 million engaged in wildlife watching. Wildlife translates to big business when you consider that expenditures related to wildlife recreation totaled \$145 billion nationally. That's one percent of the nation's entire gross domestic product!

While reading these figures back in September, I was eagerly waiting for November and December to arrive with opportunities for hunting deer and wild turkeys along with other wild game. It's a season of great anticipation and participation which can be counted on to produce memories that will last you a lifetime! It's the time of the year to share the joys of the great outdoors, to introduce young and new hunters to different aspects of our favorite pursuits, and to instill in all who participate an obligation to do so ethically and safely.

On that score, Matt Knox reminds us that we can never be too safe and that, once fired, you can't "pray a bullet back into a gun." Also inside, magazine editor Sally Mills introduces us to the wonderful Mattaponi Wildlife Management Area. Other staff members have contributed as well: DGIF biologist Aaron Proctor spotlights a growing concern over the spread of feral hogs—an invasive species of the highest order. And biologist Fred Frenzel updates us on the return of the fisher to the Virginia family of furbearing animals. A feature on jump-shooting ducks takes us back in time, while another feature about conservation successes heralds a brighter future.

There's even a dark side to this issue: that of the nighttime pursuit of saw-whet owls. Having participated in the quest for the capture and banding of saw-whets, I highly commend this piece to you. I have the utmost respect and appreciation for the folks who volunteer long nights of tending to mist nets in order to expand our knowledge about these elusive, magnificent creatures.

Finally, I extend my appreciation to all who have provided such positive feedback on this magazine. The editorial team does a superb job of crafting a publication that I hope you can be as proud to read as we are to produce. See you out there!

MISSION STATEMENT

To manage Virginia's wildlife and inland fish to maintain optimum populations of all species to serve the needs of the Commonwealth; To provide opportunity for all to enjoy wildlife, inland fish, boating and related outdoor recreation and to work diligently to safeguard the rights of the people to hunt, fish and harvest game as provided for in the Constitution of Virginia; To promote safety for persons and property in connection with boating, hunting and fishing; To provide educational outreach programs and materials that foster an awareness of and appreciation for Virginia's fish and wildlife resources, their habitats, and hunting, fishing, and boating opportunities.

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Getting a Bead on the
Saw-whet



©Gail Brown

Kim Cook (L) and Julie Kacmarcik set up mist nets in a wooded area to capture saw-whets. Nets must be taken down each night in order to protect the birds.

Volunteers and researchers work hard to ensure a future for this tiny predator of the night skies.

by Gail Brown

It's dark. And still. No hunters' moon tonight. Snow is coming, maybe before the saw-whets. Headlamps, like eyeshine through the pines, flicker high then low. It might seem some shenanigans are at play, perhaps some Halloween mischief. Yet it is science that disturbs the woods tonight as Julie Kacmarcik, Kim Cook, Margaret Ebbs, and Sarah Hierholzer—all working under Master Bander Bob Reilly's federal bird banding permit—get down to the task at hand: capture, band, and gather data about migrating Northern saw-whet owls (*Aegolius acadicus*). To that end, 12-meter-long mist nets are set in an "I" formation a short distance into a mixed deciduous-pine forest in the Powhatan Wildlife Management Area (PWMA). The two nets at the top

and bottom of the "I" run east to west; the two placed in the center run north to south. All directions are covered.

A flip of a switch on an audio lure shatters the stillness with a series of three short, edgy hoots. Kacmarcik gives Bob Reilly, professor of economics and environmental studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, a quick call to let him know all is set. Reilly, who began monitoring saw-whets in 2003 at his Timber Creek site in Powhatan, now oversees seven sites throughout the state (with six in the Piedmont area), including one at Virginia Commonwealth University's Rice Center which is monitored by Kacmarcik and DGIF biologist John "J.D." Kleopfer.

Reilly and his sub-permittees follow protocols set by Project OwlNet, an organization founded by David F. Brinker (Maryland



©Gail Brown

Above, (L to R) Julie Kacmarcik, Margaret Ebbs, and Kim Cook appreciate the beauty and the feisty personality of these tiny owls. Right, a numbered band is placed on the lower right leg. It must rotate easily so the feathers do not get trapped.

Department of Natural Resources) and dedicated to research in owl migration. "Project OwlNet is a great resource," states Kacmarcik, "as is the Richmond Audubon Society. They have provided some financial support and helped us in so many ways." And Bob Reilly? "Bob is on speed-dial! Whatever questions we have, he answers right away. He is always there to help, and when we think we can't, his faith in us shows us we can. None of us would be doing this if it weren't for him."

Kacmarcik's team always begins in late October and finishes up in early March when the owls typically stop coming. Their work is straightforward: Captured birds are brought to the station, where data is gathered and the birds are banded; owls are returned to the point of capture within an hour. This back and forth routine is repeated as long as the



©Gail Brown

saw-whets keep coming, and most nights even when they don't. "How do you know," raised eyebrows suggest, "unless you stay?" Yet experience can be a tough teacher. One season, from the fall of 2006 until March 2007, not a single bird was captured. Zero. "But we came back the next year," states Kacmarcik, "and every year since."

When queried about those results, Cook replies: "Bob (Reilly) would say 'no data is still data' and it is. We learn something every time, but there's still so much we don't understand and need to find out." Then came 2010: Kacmarcik and Cook worked nonstop through the night, banding 13 owls and closing the nets as the sun came up. There's just no telling.

While Northern saw-whet owls (NSWO) are inconsistent in their migratory patterns from year to year, in the eastern U.S. they migrate along a broad front from the Atlantic coastline to the Ohio River Valley. Data collected show that climate, food sources, and habitat destruction appear to affect their migration. Yet, if "inconsistent" encapsulates the saw-whet's migratory patterns, then "contradictory" explains the otherworldly appearance—from saucer-like eyes that sweetly threaten "the better to track you with, my dear," to the oversized head atop the wide chest and short body that suggests a friendly,

somewhat whimsical, apparition. Don't be fooled. That head can swerve 270 degrees to lock onto, track, and kill its prey. The tiny bill is a dark, hooked weapon that can tear the head off deer mice (a favorite food), moles, voles, even small rats and birds. If there's a sense of conflict about this raptor, it's that it pits what our hearts want to believe—this fairytale-like creature is tame—against what our brains know to be true: This is a wild animal with all the attributes of a deadly hunter.

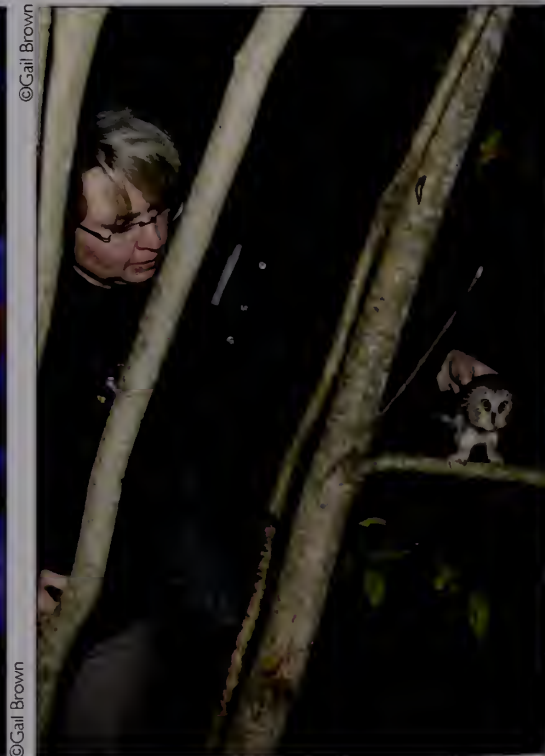
And what a hunter it is! The smallest owls east of the Mississippi, saw-whets have binocular vision which allows them to use both eyes simultaneously and see objects with great depth of field. The saw-whet has no ear tufts; sounds penetrate to the ear openings (placed asymmetrically on each side of the skull) through loose, doily-like feathers that cover the facial disc. The right ear-opening is lower and points down; the left is higher, pointing up. This gives the saw-whet extraordinary "surround sound" hearing, allowing it to lock onto the faintest sounds and hunt in almost total darkness. Its powerful hearing and vision, combined with almost silent flight (the result of the comb-like bone structure of its wings), help ensure this tiny raptor's survival in a world where both habitat and migration corridors are shrinking.

Studies of the NSWO, which have increased significantly since the late '90s, have yielded considerable information. Data indicate the average height of a NSWO is 6 to 8 inches, with females weighing approximately 85–125 grams, males 65–85 grams, and the wingspan reaching 17 to 20 inches. To put weight into perspective, a rather hefty owl can be thought of as weighing about the same as two Hostess® cupcakes! During banding, the muscle mass surrounding the keel and under the wings is checked for fat stores, and tail and bill measurements are also recorded. Although sexing protocols are still being developed, currently mass and wing cord measurements are used to identify the sex of the owl. Aging is done through the use of a blacklight on the underside of the wing: no variation in color indicates a newborn, whereas a great variation in the base color of primary and secondary feathers indicates an older owl. Any non-banded owl gets a numbered band (on the lower right leg) which must rotate easily so the feathers do not get trapped. The band number on previously banded birds ("recaps") is recorded along with current measurements. All data are reported to the USGS Bird Banding Lab.

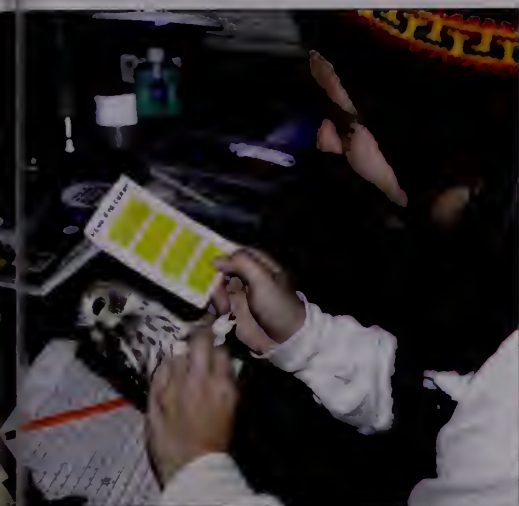
DGIF's Kleopfer is encouraged. "This project has allowed us to get a better



When the wing is placed under a blacklight, newer feathers appear pink; older feathers look white. This information helps determine the age of the bird.



Kim Cook releases a newly banded bird at the point of capture.



Sarah Hierholzer compares the color of the bird's iris to shades on a standardized chart. While researchers note the difference, its significance is not known at this time.

understanding of the NSWOW in the Piedmont region. Without the assistance of 'citizen biologists' such as Kacmarcik, our jobs would be much more difficult," he maintains.

Although the Northern saw-whet owl can be seen in all parts of the continental U.S., its main breeding areas are southern Canada, the northern forests of the United States, the Appalachians, the Pacific Coast to southern Alaska, down the Rocky Mountains and into Mexico. Yet, recaptures in southern states suggest the owls also breed in areas not previously considered as permanent habitat. Breeding saw-whets have been recorded in the mountains of Virginia, with the first confirmed NSWOW nest (holding two eggs) discovered in a Northern flying squirrel nest box by DGIF's John R. Baker and W. Daniel Lovelace in 1989. Virginia Commonwealth University biologist Dr. John F. Pagels identified another nest in Locust Springs in 1995.

If discovered roosting in a thicket during daylight, the owl will remain straight and still, relying on its ability to remain cryptic even after it's too late, a behavior easily misinterpreted by humans. Just because this owl does not show distress does not mean it should be disturbed. These are wild animals protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. As a nongame species, it is illegal to collect, harm, or remove them from their natural environment.

While the NSWOW is common across the continental U.S., in Virginia the situation is different. The *Virginia Wildlife Action Plan*

lists four tiers (Tier I being the most sensitive) to help identify, according to need, species at risk. The NSWOW is listed as a Tier II bird under the plan and, as such, is described as having "very high conservation need, facing high risk of extinction or extirpation with immediate management needed for stabilization and recovery."

To help mitigate these serious concerns, the contributions of Reilly and his sub-permittees take on increasing importance. In 2003, Reilly was able to band eight saw-whets at his Powhatan site. By 2011, 957 saw-whets had been banded at sites operating under his federal bird-banding permit. Reilly sums up their goals: "Expand the small database of wintering records in the state; identify the contributing factors in the state to variation in wintering density; determine the degree to which age affects the migratory and wintering strategies; extend our current knowledge of molt strategies in older owls through year-to-year recaptures of known-age individuals; and contribute to Project OwlNet." As Reilly states, "Any of the information we gain about the saw-whet's migratory habits helps us plan accordingly to protect it, as well as other natural resources."

Such was the case when the Powhatan County Planning Commission sought Reilly's

assistance in their efforts to plan for future development, while also protecting their natural resources. Because "...we now know that we have a population of NSWOWs overwintering here, not just passing through, we can better plan to meet their habitat requirements," states Reilly, who has strong praise for the commission and for the help provided by the DGIF's Sergio Harding and Amy Ewing during the commission's planning stage. "Harding and Ewing did a good job explaining the needs, not only of birds, but of all wildlife, and the county worked to meet those needs."

Yet while protection of our natural resources depends on the help of people like Reilly and Kacmarcik, every year along with the saw-whets comes the need for all volunteers to reinvest a considerable amount of their time and money in this project. Even as nets go up, things must be evaluated, decisions made, changes considered. Still, no one seems willing to turn their backs to the magic or stop to reconcile personal finances against their passion. Not when the stars are so bright, and the woods smell of snow, and the saw-whets are coming. ☛

Gail Brown is a retired teacher and school administrator.



A metric caliper is used to measure the bill, which is dark, hooked, and sharp. Deer mice, voles, small rats, and birds are food for this raptor.

by Tee Clarkson

I love Nash Buckingham's hunting stories about Horace and him poling through the swamps of Mississippi, about "an ever-increasing thunder of wing clash, swan trumpets and dining goose gabble" when "zenith and horizon were awirl with ducks." Those were different times, with old wooden boats rounding bends and ducks jumping so thick from the cypress swamps it was hard to pick a bird to shoot. Of course there must have been days like that, but there must have been slow ones as well. No one writes about getting skunked. The greatest feeling I gather from reading Nash Buckingham is not awe at the numbers of birds, nor excitement at raising a gun to the sky and pulling the trigger. It is the importance of the moment, the simple importance of just being there.

♦ ♦ ♦

©Eric Rutherford

Ducks, The Old Way

When we pulled down the road toward the river, it was as if we were steering backwards in time. On our right was what had been the clubhouse for a duck club more than 100 years ago. This was a duck club when Nash Buckingham hunted the swamps of Mississippi at the turn of the 20th century: when men rode the train down from Richmond, when there was no electricity, when lanterns lit the building warmed by a wood stove. This was a club where men were connected to this earth, to the tides, to the migrations, to the importance of just being there.

I guess we were cheating a little with a trolling motor as we eased down the river in a small wooden boat to where the first creek left the main channel and began its long, lazy slither through tidal marsh. Once we hit the creek, we switched to paddles and I loaded my gun in the front seat. Jump shooting was a different sort of hunting than I was used to, but folks have done so on these waters for over a century and I looked forward to giving it a try. The one thing that has always drawn me to duck hunting is the activity. I like being able to move around, to talk on occasion. I am not one to sit passively in a tree for hours waiting for a buck to show, although I can appreciate the allure of those quiet moments too.

It had felt wrong to meet at nine for a morning duck hunt. By mid-December I have become accustomed to the alarm waking me in the dark, before the hour hand has hit five. This hunt was different. Although I had snuck up on a few ducks in my life, I had never left the house for a duck hunt without decoys and calls; with just a box of shells and my gun, wearing jeans and boots and a jacket.

Having once been the primary means of harvesting ducks, jump shooting has taken a back seat today among duck hunters with handheld GPS devices, shaker magnets, and mojo ducks. Not that there is anything wrong with those. I use them all. But today it was nice to be trying a different tactic.

It was almost ten when we headed out. The morning tide was just starting to turn back in and there was enough water in the creeks to get around. The banks were higher on the low tide, allowing us to sneak up closer to the birds before they jumped. I readied myself in the front as we rounded the first bend. Three mallards sprang from the water about 20 yards in front of the boat. I raised my gun and dropped a greenhead with my second shot as it peeled out over the reeds with the wind, reminding me of a wild pheasant flush from back in the day when I pursued upland birds in Nebraska. One couldn't script a better start to the hunt.

The morning continued along the way it began. Sometimes we got close enough for a good clean shot; other times, the birds jumped ahead of us out of range. Within two hours I had a limit of four mallards, a gadwall, and a green-winged teal. I'll take a limit of ducks any way I can get them, within the rules of course.

I've heard stories about the old days at the club, about the men who came here back in Nash Buckingham's day (even saw their bird totals in a logbook from the early 1900s). And it is easy to get caught up in history and envy what it must have been like 50 years earlier, 100 years earlier. I love thinking about it, but I have to remind myself that what it really must have been like was... exactly like this: two men in a boat,

rounding the bends of these same creeks, jumping the ancestors of these same ducks whose genetic wiring has been bringing them to this marsh year after year since before the shotgun, before the arrow, before man set foot on this ground or paddled boats in this river. Sure, maybe there were more birds on some days, but hadn't it been exactly like this—the sun rising slowly on the December horizon, the



©Eric Rutherford

rising tide cracking thin ice along the banks, the beating wings of jumping mallards cutting the crisp morning air, the sharp reports of shotguns bellowing over the marsh? Hadn't it always been important just being here? ❧

Tee Clarkson is an English teacher at Deep Run High School in Henrico Co. and runs Virginia Fishing Adventures, a fishing camp for kids: tsclarkson@virginiafishingadventures.com.

You Can't Pray a Bu



Let Back Into a Gun

by Matt Knox

I wish this article was mandatory reading for every deer hunter in Virginia each and every year. In fact, this entire article is about wishes.

For the past two decades, when I write my annual deer season forecast and annual letter to the 900-plus Deer Management Assistance Cooperators across Virginia, I always end with something to the effect:

Lastly, and most importantly, one last point that I think should be the number one priority is SAFETY. I am sure you have heard it all before, but hunting safety cannot be overemphasized. No deer that ever walked across the commonwealth is worth someone getting injured or killed over. For example, if you allow hunting from tree stands, consider having a rule requiring a safety belt. Make all of your hunters hold a valid hunter safety card, regardless of their age. We have an excellent hunter safety staff and program; take advantage of it. Be safe.

Then, after every season, everyone wants to know how many deer were harvested and if the deer kill was a new “record,” as though high deer kill numbers and records indicate a successful deer season. It may hurt some feelings, but I really don’t care what the deer kill number is—last year, this year, or next year. Every year I have the same wish for what I would consider the “perfect” deer season, and it is based on a number: the number zero. It is a wish that no one will get hurt or killed while deer hunting in Virginia. Will we ever accomplish it? No, but zero deer hunting-related accidents and fatalities has to be our number one deer hunting goal. *Again, no deer that ever walked across the commonwealth is worth someone getting injured or killed over.*

Data collected across the United States over the past several decades clearly show that *feeling safe* is the most important consideration for deer hunters going afield, followed closely by seeing deer sign, seeing deer, the challenge of the hunt, and being close to nature.

This helps me reconcile the fact that I tend to be *obsessive* about safety. I have used a



©Ralph Hensley

Wearing blaze orange during all hunting seasons is a “highly-recommended” safety precaution.

No deer that ever walked across the commonwealth is worth someone getting injured or killed over.

climbing tree stand for decades, but I also have always used a safety harness because I believe in gravity. I cannot see gravity, but I believe in it. And if you were to see me walking into or out of the deer woods, I would have on hunter orange—regardless of the season. If it is dark I will have on a head lamp, and I might be singing or whistling a tune. Hunting purists will tell you that I am scaring the deer. But it is not the deer I am concerned about.

I have been lucky. I have never been involved in a hunting accident, but I have a brother-in-law who shot his brother during a deer drive in New York about 20 years ago. The injured man survived, but only by the grace of God, good doctors, and time.

Every year, dozens of Virginia deer hunters are injured in deer hunting-related accidents. It is the most discouraging part of my job, because absolutely none of it has to happen.



Three years ago, the very worst happened: A non-hunter was shot and killed by a deer hunter. On November 17, 2009 in Franklin County while walking with two other students working in the field on a biology class project, Ferrum College senior Jessica "Jess" Goode was shot and killed by a deer hunter who thought he was shooting at a deer. The bullet that killed Jess Goode also hit one of her fellow students, Regis Boudinott, in the arm and hand.

I had lived in fear of this type of accident for nearly twenty years, and it literally made me physically ill the afternoon it happened. It still evokes a very strong emotion in me to this day. I do not think it will ever go away. Why? Because on a daily basis I am asked to represent Virginia's deer hunters. As a deer hunter, I readily acknowledge that we all accept some level of risk when we go afield. Hopefully, that risk is miniscule. Some of us do everything we can to minimize it, but if we are honest with ourselves, we acknowledge it.

Climbing 10 to 20 feet in the air and hanging off the side of a tree, sitting with a loaded gun, has safety implications. Jess Goode and the public do not accept—and should not have to accept—a risk related to deer hunting. In my opinion, it was the "worst case" deer hunting accident and fatality scenario.

I have never met the shooter and will never have the chance to meet Jess Goode, but I have spent a lot of time thinking about Jess and her family, about him and his family, and about what he did. Of course, my first reaction like most deer hunters was shock and anger. Since that time, I have come to realize that he made a mistake. He made a very, very poor decision, a decision that he will have to live with. I do not need to talk to him. I have seen him on the news and realize that this hunting accident has changed his life and his family's life forever. And not for the better. Today, I would not wish his situation upon my worst enemy.

◆ ◆ ◆

So how do you avoid a deer hunting accident? Actually, I think it is very simple. First, follow the NRA's gun safety rules:

- ◆ **Always keep the gun pointed in a safe direction.** This is the primary rule of gun safety. A safe direction means that the gun is pointed so that even if it were to go off it would not cause injury or damage. The key to this rule is to control where the muzzle or front end of the barrel is pointed at all times. Common sense dictates the safest direction, depending on each circumstance.
- ◆ **Always keep your finger off the trigger until ready to shoot.**
- ◆ **Always keep the gun unloaded until ready to use.**
- ◆ **Know your target and what is beyond.** Be absolutely sure you have identified your target beyond any doubt. Equally important, be aware of the area beyond your target. This means observing your prospective area of fire before you shoot.





Always know your target (pg. 14) and what is beyond it. Above, wear a safety harness while in a tree stand.

Think first. Shoot second.

- ◆ Never fire in a direction in which there are people or any other potential for mishap. **Think first. Shoot second.**

Second, do not be a game violator or associate with game violators. I have never seen the study, but I am one hundred percent convinced that the odds of being involved in a serious deer hunting accident increase exponentially in cases where the deer hunters are violating game laws (e.g., hunting out of season, trespassing, hunting over bait, hunting without a license).

Why? Because these persons have already consciously decided to violate game laws, why should they follow basic gun safety rules? To break the game laws and then follow the NRA's gun safety rules is illogical. On the day Jess Goode was killed, for example, the shooter was trespassing, carrying a concealed

weapon without a permit, and hunting without a license. As I wrote this article, one of our conservation police officers in the next office was writing a hunting accident report where a deer hunter shot his hunting companion while standing in an illegal bait pile. Hunting with, or around, game violators can get you killed.

The deer hunter who shot Jess Goode was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to eight years in jail, with seven years suspended. He will be on probation for three years after he is released. As part of the plea agreement, the Goode family requested that he speak at Department hunter safety courses for five years after his release.

The bottom line is simple. When you go deer hunting and pull the trigger on a gun, you have made a decision that you are going to live with for the rest of your life. If you have

followed a few, very simple safety rules, you will never have to give this decision a second thought. However, if you violate these safety rules, you may go to prison. And I guess you will spend a good part of the rest of your life lying awake at night, wishing you could pray that bullet back into the gun.

The bad news is that you cannot pray a bullet back into a gun. Like many deer hunters, including the person who shot and killed Jess Goode, I have tried and failed. Please, be safe. ❧

Matt Knox serves as one of two deer project coordinators for the Department. He resides in Bedford County.

Please, be safe.

by Charlie Petrocci

*Off the beaten path,
beautiful Pitts Creek
offers a tranquil fishing
experience.*

The Eastern Shore is loaded with an assortment of tidal creeks, meandering streams, and small guts traversing both the seaside and bayside portions of the peninsula. So there are plenty of places to drop a small boat in and explore to your heart's content. And many of these small waterways are easily reached and well defined on maps and other information sites. But on the northern end of Accomack County there sits one small, isolated tidal creek that can only be accessed from another river, by a boat ramp located off the beaten path, or by a road not often taken. That is Pitts Creek—a pretty little tidal waterway whose twisting course through forest, marsh, and swamp forms the unofficial northern boundary between Virginia and Maryland on the western side of the Eastern Shore. Got all that?

Pitts Creek claims its beginning just northwest of the town of New Church, in an area called Beaverdam. As it flows southwest, the creek fattens up as it is fed considerable amounts of fresh water from Dunn's Swamp, an inhospitable area home to inundated cypress trees, brown water snakes, greenbrier, ticks, and a dense growth of loblolly pines along its upland fringes. As the creek moves downstream, upland gives way to marsh. It widens and empties into the Pocomoke River, a deep dark tannic-stained river, which in turn eventually forms Pocomoke Sound in the Chesapeake Bay.

To access Pitts Creek by small boat there are only two ways to get in: Plan A is by clawing your way down the embankment at the small bridge that crosses the creek at Route 705 or Wagram Road (which is best done in winter or early spring due to vegetative growth, mud, and creepy crawlies); or Plan B, which is to wind your way along the tricky

©Charlie Petrocci

The Water on The State

back road of Route 709 to Bell Road which dead-ends at a Virginia state boat ramp on the Pocomoke River. Here you can drop your boat in and either paddle or motor the quarter-mile upriver to the entrance of Pitts Creek. I usually opt for Plan B for the sake of convenience, with less chance of inflicting open wounds.

Fish of Two Worlds

Because Pitts Creek is tidal, it hosts an assortment of fish species, including those of both fresh and saltwater domains. And as with most moving bodies of water, fish found here come and go with the seasons and often even with the tide. So anglers must plan accordingly.

When using my kayak, I like to put in at the Route 709 boat ramp during the last of a rising tide, preferably during the morning hours. This gives me a chance to fish for rockfish, perch, and croaker as the tide eases me

toward the entrance to Pitts Creek, which in itself is a hotspot. I'll then fish my way up Pitts, staying until either the fishing action wanes or the outgoing tide beckons me back downstream. And remember, weather can mean everything when fishing a tidal creek. So after heavy rains, saltwater fish will "flush" out into deeper holes, and during dry spells, intruding salt water will push freshwater species farther upstream.

For anglers wanting to fish Pitts Creek during the late spring season, the fish of choice around the mouth of the creek will include stripers, white perch, croaker, and spot. There are also shad and herring here, but this is a strictly catch-and-release activity. You can fish the shorelines by casting leadhead jigs, swimming plugs, or live lining minnows under an in-line float. Or anchor up and fish the bottom using soft crabs, bloodworms, or live minnows. Anglers can also catch rockfish, spot, and croakers by fishing a baited bottom

rig from the shoreline around the boat ramp.

"During the spring and fall seasons, I like to anchor my boat just inside the entrance to Pitts Creek and fish for white perch. Usually bloodworms fished on the bottom does the trick, and can also put a few good eating-sized catfish in the cooler as well," says Jimmy Inserra of Captains Cove.

As you move upstream in Pitts Creek, salt water gives way to fresh and the game plan changes. Here among the deadfall and shoreline grasses, largemouth bass, yellow perch, catfish, and crappie will now fill the angler's dance card. Fish will boil as you pass through their lair.

So on any given day, for those taking the time to fish their way upstream or paddle downstream from the Wagram Road Bridge, a variety of game fish can be encountered in very close quarters and anglers will virtually have the place to themselves. And if you want



White perch

Line
Line



Pitts Creek Legacy

Behind every named Virginia river, creek, or stream there is usually a story of some kind. And many times these stories are not only interesting, but have historical significance as well. This is true of Pitts Creek.

Pitts Creek, like most Eastern Shore rivers, was part of a Native American and colonial water highway. Over the centuries, explorers, traders, hunters, soldiers, and smugglers traveled its watercourse.

The name Pitts Creek was born in 1665 when a Lt. Colonel Robert Pitts acquired approximately 3,000 acres of land in and around the Pocomoke River and along the nearby stream that was to bear his name. Pitts built a home not far from the present boat ramp and called the area Pitts Neck Farm. The property included a large working farm, tobacco warehouse, and landing site used to transport tobacco and trade goods down to the Chesapeake Bay and as far as the West Indies. In those days this area around the Pocomoke River was true wilderness, and the Pitts family lived off the bounty of the farm and their fish nets.

Robert Pitts died in 1670, but his family carried on, working both the land and the rivers for well over 150 years. A larger house was built on the farm around the year 1710; this structure still stands today. One of its distinctive features is its scrolled molded doorway, one of only two known to exist in Virginia. Pitts Landing also was visited by Union troops called “Zouaves” during the Civil War, when Union gunboats landed them as a reconnaissance force in August of 1861. It was also a regular stop until the 1950s for steamship ferries traveling to Baltimore. The Pitts Neck Farm home is now a registered Virginia Historic Landmark.



©Charlie Petrocci

Small watercraft are all you need to explore and fish Pitts Creek. A reconditioned boat ramp is located on the Pocomoke River very near the existing Pitts Neck Farm historic house (left).

to fish from shore, there are also possibilities from the small bridge which crosses the upper end of Pitts Creek or along the parking lot of the boat ramp as well.

The boat ramp to access Pitts Creek has been recently improved and will easily handle getting kayaks, canoes, or small boats into the water for a day of fishing or exploring. The ramp is actually located on the Pocomoke River, just southwest to the entrance to Pitts Creek. This area is called Pitts Creek Neck—a place of some historic importance. Across the Pocomoke River from the boat ramp is Somerset County, Maryland, with the small village of Shelltown visible in the distance.

“Whenever we make patrols up this creek, we rarely ever see anyone else up here. It’s a pretty underutilized spot,” reports veteran officer Grady Ellis with the Virginia Marine Resources Commission.

Wildlife

Because Pitts Creek is influenced by both tidal action and a freshwater swamp, the area is a hot spot for birding and wildlife observation. During late fall, the lower end of the creek will host an assortment of waterfowl, including buffleheads, mergansers, black ducks, gadwall, widgeon, and wood ducks, among others. There are also plenty of Canada geese in the area from October through March.

Wading birds will include great blue herons, great egrets, little blue herons, and black-crowned night herons. Other species present include grebes, coots, and rails, along with belted kingfishers which will announce your presence at every bend in the river. Birds of prey include great horned owls, barred owls, red-shouldered hawks, and ospreys.



Located on the Maryland state line, Pitts Creek is part of the tidal turf that Virginia Marine Patrol Officers Grady Ellis and Tom Fitchett periodically check. Anglers and waterfowl hunters seasonally use the waterway. ©Charlie Petrocci



Bring an assortment of lures, since you can encounter largemouth bass, pickerel, yellow perch, striped bass, and even longnose gar.

Because the Pocomoke is a primary winter feeding area for bald eagles, large numbers of these magnificent birds utilize the waters around Pitts Creek from December through March. The Pocomoke does not freeze, so there are plenty of prey fish in the river to support their feeding habits. And there are several large bald eagle nests along Pitts Creek, supporting a year-round population as well.

Other Pitts Creek residents include the brown water snake, black rat snake, and stacks of various turtles of every size and temperament. Mammal sightings along the banks can include deer, otter, raccoon, and of course muskrats by the basketful.

Low tide in the early morning or evening is often the best time to catch a glimpse of wildlife feeding along the creek. And I'm sure there's also the occasional

arrowhead or spear point that appears from the eroded oyster-shell-infused banks. Leave them be, so that others might also witness the connection to those early native hunters who originally utilized this challenging land.

Pitts Creek may not be the easiest waterway to get to, but you will probably be the only boat on the water. And its simple beauty makes the trip worth the effort. It is a place where the tide line is not the end line. And the state line is not the finish line. It is a waterway that beckons the intrepid paddler or angler to cross the line and take a chance on a little "off the beaten path" adventure. 🌿

Charlie Petrocci is a maritime heritage researcher, lecturer, and consultant who specializes in coastal traditions such as fisheries, seafood, and community folklife. He has lived on the Shore for 25 years.

Feral Hogs: Trouble

by Aaron Proctor

You can call them wild hogs, wild boars, razorbacks, or even Russian boars. Most wildlife biologists refer to them collectively as feral hogs or feral pigs. Whatever you call them, they pose disastrous threats to wildlife habitat wherever they exist and are nothing but bad news. But what exactly *is* a feral hog? Merriam-Webster defines the word *feral* as “not domesticated or cultivated” and “having escaped from domestication and become wild.” Simply put, it’s a hog that is surviving on its own in the wild without ownership. Feral hogs do not have to possess thick and coarse black hair or have long tusks. They are known to have different shades and combinations of black, brown, red, and blonde hair. A feral hog can simply be a hog that has escaped a farm operation or has been released to the wild; free from the influence of any humans, buildings, or fences.

Currently, feral hogs are known to exist in at least 40 states across the country. There are an estimated 4 to 6 million nationwide, with an estimated 2.5 million in Texas alone. We can thank early explorer Hernando DeSoto for first introducing swine in the southeastern

U.S. in the 1500s in present-day Florida. Like many other domesticated livestock animals, hogs seemed an easy choice to bring to a new world as a food source. But there are some crucial differences between swine and other livestock animals. Hogs have the ability to thrive in a wild state, can exist in a variety of climates, and possess a very high reproductive potential. They also disturb the ground as they forage and turn up the earth (called “rooting”). They have been described as “four-legged ecological disasters.” That’s about as bad as it gets among the wildlife community.

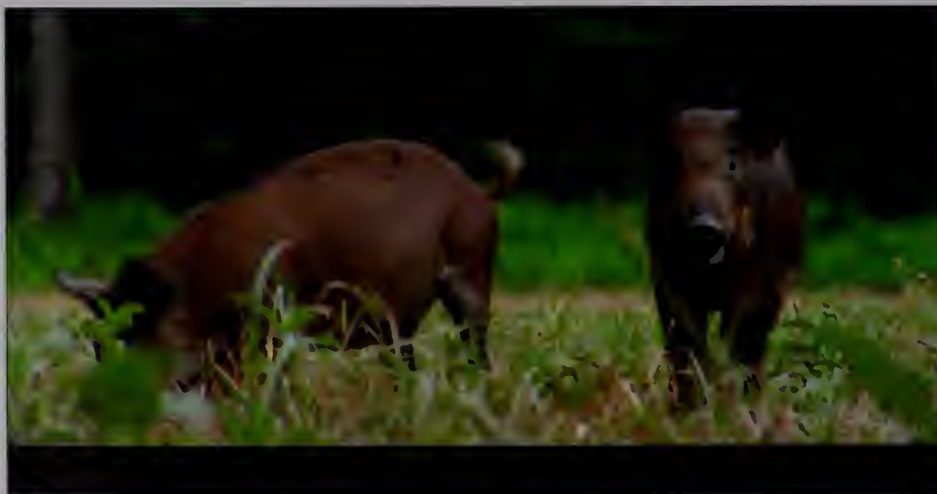
A pair of mature swine can produce 3 litters of up to 4–8 piglets about every 14 months. Once piglets reach the juvenile size-class, approximately 40 pounds at about 6 months of age, there really aren’t any natural predators on our landscape that can control their numbers. Feral hogs are the biological equivalent of a military battle tank. Their coarse hair, thick skin, and cartilaginous plates on their shoulder blades evolved for protection from fighting with each other. Thousands of years of domestication are not enough to suppress these hidden genes. A group of pink and portly barnyard hogs left out in the wild can revert

back to this wild-looking state in only a few generations. They are also a filthy species. Feral hogs are known to carry at least 45 different diseases and parasites that can be infectious or harmful to livestock, pets, native wildlife, and humans.

In Virginia, the only long-term or historical population of feral hogs exists in the extreme southeastern Virginia Beach area, in Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, and in False Cape State Park. Estimated to fluctuate between 200 and 500 individuals, this population is the result of subsistence farmers abandoning their homesteads in the 1920s–1930s and leaving their livestock behind. The fact that a breeding population of hogs has existed in this rather harsh and sandy environment for nearly 100 years is a testament to their heartiness and ability to survive in a multitude of habitats. Throughout the years, this population has been hunted through controlled programs and other collection efforts and is greatly undesired on both the federal and state lands they occupy. Yet they still exist, proving that hunting alone does not control population numbers.

A look at range maps from 1988 and 2009 (pg. 21) paints a grim picture. Feral hogs are spreading like wildfire across the country, and they don’t pop up in new areas without help. Pigs are not migratory animals. More and more suspect populations of feral hogs are appearing across the commonwealth, where wildlife biologists for both the Department (DGIF) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Wildlife Services speculate that intentional releases are occurring by those who wish to get feral hogs established for hunting purposes.

Decades of wild hog hunting in many states, often without bag limits under a “nuisance species” declaration, has done nothing to stop their spread. In fact, it is most likely making it worse. The popularization of hog hunting is growing, so it follows that the desire by some to transport and stock feral swine



Mississippi State University Extension

The spread of feral hogs across the U.S. is nothing but bad news.

on the Horizon

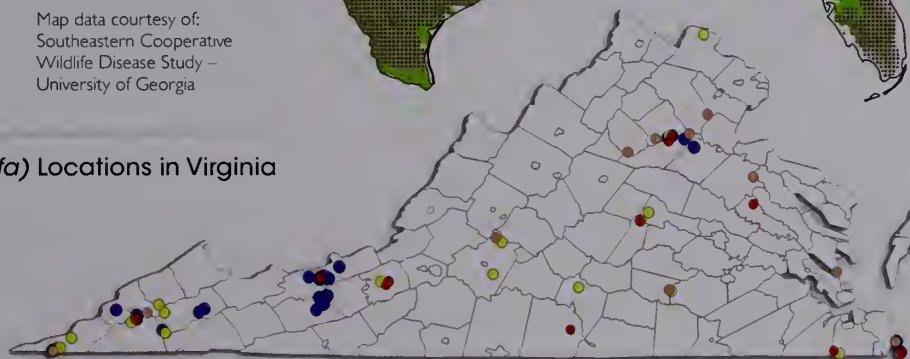
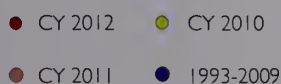
LEGEND

Feral Hog Locations in the US



Map data courtesy of:
Southeastern Cooperative
Wildlife Disease Study –
University of Georgia

June 2012 Feral Hog (*Ses scrofa*) Locations in Virginia



USDA APHIS WS VA & DGIF

Feral hogs are known to carry at least 45 different diseases and parasites that can be infectious or harmful to livestock, pets, native wildlife, and humans.

in new places is growing as well. But feral hogs are not “fun and games.” What may seem like an innocent sport where one can harvest hogs as a nuisance species actually poses a tremendous threat to our native wildlife and habitat across the commonwealth.

Last year the Department formed a feral hog committee along with partner agencies and is beginning to focus on the feral hog problem in Virginia. We hope that landowners, hunters, and wildlife enthusiasts alike will all band together to understand and support the idea that there's no place for these hogs in the wild. If you see or suspect that feral hogs are on your property, please notify your nearest DGIF office. For more information on feral swine and control methods, please visit the following web pages: www.extension.org/feral_hogs and <http://wildpiginfo.msstate.edu/index.html>.

Jon Simmons

Aaron Proctor serves as the Department's district biologist in the southeastern region of the state.



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Among other concerns, feral hogs cause tremendous damage to the landscape.



Welcome Back!

by Fred Frenzel

“What in the world *was* that thing?” This question has been heard more frequently in northwestern Virginia lately, as outdoorsmen have spotted an elusive and unusual animal in the local forest.

Some called it a “black fox.” Others had no idea what to call it. Then, in the fall of 2008 a deer hunter in western Frederick County was fortunate enough to have his

brand new video camera with him when he encountered this strange creature in a tree near his deer stand. He had no idea what it was, but after some quick on-the-job training with the new camera, he was able to capture it on film. He contacted Department personnel, who then viewed what would turn out to be the first known video of a live fisher (*Martes pennanti*) in the wilds of the commonwealth. Later, photographs of live fishers were captured in Page County—first by a hunter’s trail camera in 2009 and then by a county animal control officer in 2011. A fisher also showed



©Leonard Lee Rue



©Leonard Lee Rue

up in trail camera photos from Shenandoah County during that winter.

The fisher is not a new animal to Virginia. They once roamed the Appalachian Mountains at least as far south as North Carolina and Tennessee. However, they are believed to have been extirpated from Virginia and West Virginia by the early 1900s, long before the days of video technology. Likely reasons for their disappearance from large portions of their native range include loss of habitat, as well as the unregulated trapping that took place before the establishment of state wildlife agencies.

What is a fisher?

The fisher is a large member of the weasel family (*Mustelidae*). They are about the size of a fox, with average weights of 5 pounds for females and 10 pounds for males. Lengths range from 29 inches for a small female to 47 inches for a large male. Their fur is dark brown to black, with occasional white patches on the throat or chest. Female fishers give birth once a year. An average litter size is three young, called kits. Fishers have retractable claws, like a cat, and are excellent climbers. They will take to

the trees if necessary to escape danger or to search for a meal, but fishers actually spend most of their time on the ground.

Like their relatives, fishers are efficient predators and will take small animals such as rabbits, mice, squirrels, and birds. They will also eat carrion and have been known to scavenge deer carcasses. This trait has probably added to their reputation as fierce predators. In some cases, people wrongly assumed that a fisher actually killed deer, which, in reality, died from other causes. In addition to the carnivore's standard diet of meat, fishers have



The fisher is a member of the weasel family. It is about the size of a fox, with dark brown fur, and is an excellent climber.

also been known to eat some fruit when it is abundant. Perhaps the most unusual item on the fisher's menu, however, is the porcupine (*Erethizon dorsatum*).

In areas where their ranges overlap, the fisher is the most common and most effective predator of the porcupine! While most predators are deterred by the porcupine's covering of sharp, barbed quills, the fisher has developed a technique to overcome them. A fisher finding a porcupine in the open will circle it, repeatedly biting it on its face, and leap back before the porcupine can turn and use its defenses. The porcupine eventually succumbs to the attack and the fisher feeds on it through its unprotected chest and stomach area. If the porcupine is able to protect its face by using a crevice in a tree or rock, the fisher cannot penetrate its defenses and must seek other prey.

How did they get here?

The reappearance of the fisher in Virginia can likely be traced to expansion from populations in nearby West Virginia. Fishers disappeared from the Mountain State about the same time that they vanished from the Old Dominion.

However, in 1969 West Virginia game managers traded wild turkeys to the state of New Hampshire for 25 fishers. One pair was kept at French Creek Game Farm in Upshur County and the rest were released into the wilds of Tucker and Pocahontas counties. The fishers did well and in the early 1970s, a limited harvest of one fisher per season (taken either by trapping or hunting) was allowed. The total harvest in West Virginia rose from a handful of fishers in the early years to a high of 108 fishers taken during the 2007–08 season. Fishers (likely from the WV populations) also have reappeared in nearby western Maryland, where hunters and trappers may now take two per season. The total fisher harvest in Maryland for the 2010–11 season was 45.

What if I see one?

If you see a fisher in the wild, you should consider yourself lucky to have had this rare encounter. By all means take a picture or video of it if possible, but **do not harm it**. While fishers are classified as furbearers in West Virginia and Maryland and may be legally harvested in those states, **no harvest is allowed in**



This image from a trail camera in Shenandoah County helped confirm the fisher's presence in Virginia.

Virginia at this time. Our Department is very interested in documented occurrences of fishers in Virginia. If you snap a picture of a fisher or find a dead fisher in your area, please contact furbearer biologist Mike Fies, at Mike.Fies@dgif.virginia.gov or (540) 248-9360. Please help us welcome this piece of our natural history back to the Old Dominion. 🦉

Fred Frenzel has worked for DGIF for 23 years and is currently a wildlife biologist covering five counties in northwestern Virginia.



A Little Something For *Everyone*

Nestled between the town of Bowling Green and the I-95 corridor, the Mattaponi Wildlife Management Area promises a little magic to all comers.



The wildlife management area borders over six miles of the upper Mattaponi River, protecting prime habitat for a variety of species.

by Sally Mills

Sitting on the bank of the upper Mattaponi as it fans out just south of Bowling Green, it feels natural to close your eyes and imagine an early morning scene many, many decades ago. Perhaps a woman from the Mattaponi or Pamunkey tribe quietly gathering berries along the river's edge, the silence broken only by the smack of a beaver's tail upon the water's surface.

Here in the upper reaches of the river, where it passes beneath the bridge at Paige Road, it might appear that not much has changed since Virginia's indigenous people moved across this landscape. But the distant hum of 18-wheelers along the bypass to Route 301 would snap you out of that misguided daydream. In fact, the Mattaponi and

its tributary, the South River, meander in dramatic fashion amid one of the fastest growing pockets of Northern Virginia—Caroline and the adjacent counties just south of Fredericksburg.

Flowing unimpeded through several thousand acres of mixed bottomland hardwoods, pine meadows, lowland marsh, and upland ridges dotted with vernal pools, the river and its floodplain are a wildlife haven—a sportsmen's and wildlife watcher's dream. To find such a large swath of land still intact in this part of the state is nothing short of remarkable. To be able to protect that land for public benefit and wildlife conservation, hard to believe.

But it happened. The land was recently acquired by the Department for a wildlife management area (WMA), something made

possible with the help of key partners—Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, The Trust for Public Land, the U.S. Department of Defense, and Fort A.P. Hill—all of whom recognized the intrinsic value of what they could envision within their grasp.

Phil Lownes, who directs Capital Programs at the Department (DGIF), recognized it “as a rare opportunity to provide an oasis of wildlife habitat in rapidly developing Northern Virginia.” He added that diversity of habitat was key to the decision to move forward.

Deb VanDuzee works in real estate services for DGIF and was closely involved in the project. She notes that the property is just a couple hours' drive from the major population centers in the state and situated in an area where more wildlife-related recreation is sorely needed. VanDuzee describes the place as magical, remembering the call of a bobwhite when she stepped out of her car during an early visit.

It is a place that offers a little something for everyone, she maintains. And with the rich variety of flora and fauna, it does indeed. Oaks, sweet gum, and tulip poplar are among the hardwood sentinels of the forested hillsides, while river birch, alders, and high-bush blueberry grow at lower elevations. Throughout the property, sloughs from smaller creeks—which periodically flood—are alive with arrow arum, duck potato, and lizard tail.

Staff with the Division of Natural Heritage, Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), visited the property before its purchase and noted the presence of ancient oxbow lakes of a size not seen today anywhere in the state. Totalling 80 acres, the two water bodies are something quite rare to find according to Gary Fleming and Karen Patterson of DCR. Not only do they provide important habitat for dragonflies, skimmers, and a host of other insects, they offer clues to the ancient riverbed and associated land changes over time.

Management Plans

Today, management of the 2540-acre WMA is going through a transition. The property had been timbered and mined in years past by previous owners, but is being cared for in a more holistic manner now—for both game and nongame species—according to Ron Hughes, who oversees lands and facilities for the Department's northern region. While timbering will continue, it is now performed with specific focus on benefitting a wide range of wildlife. As part of that approach, forests will be managed at various age classes to create diversity for animals with differing needs.



Virginia Herpetological Society members dip-netted for tadpoles and frogs during their annual “HerpBlitz,” which was held in June throughout the Mattaponi WMA.

Creating more habitat diversity takes vision, time, and resource dollars. But some changes are already apparent and cost very little to accomplish: old borrow pits left from gravel mining operations are becoming vernal pools—a simple practice that reaps benefits for a long list of amphibians and insects, and mammals in search of water. Future wetlands development is underway with Fort A.P. Hill, one of the partners involved—and will multiply the aquatic resources and benefits to waterfowl and other species.

With the sportsman in mind, the Department will invest in a water control system at the mouth of one of the large oxbows to manage water levels. Doing so will help control vegetation for both waterfowl hunting and fishing. Freshwater fish in this stretch include bowfin, bass, yellow perch, and sunfish.

As for popular game species, deer, turkey, rabbit, otter, mink, and raccoon are present. Wood ducks and assorted puddle ducks abound. A robust quail population lives here, too, and Canada geese nest on site. The American woodcock is another, targeted focus of management efforts.

Other management tools have been employed: maintaining current openings through woodlands for wildlife passage and limiting human access to targeted locations where unique, or in some cases threatened, wildlife resources have been identified. A controlled burn is scheduled for a 200-acre parcel as early as this winter. The result will open up areas in the forest for new, emergent vegetation so important to quail and turkeys and other upland species.

Inventory Stage

At this early stage, wildlife biologists are focused on gathering as much information as possible about the various ecosystems—and specific inhabitants—on the WMA. Biologists J.D. Kleopfer and Ryan Niccoli conducted an informal, baseline survey last spring. Thus far, the team has identified 13 species of amphibians and reptiles, including the spotted salamander and river cooter. And they have collected a healthy assortment of aquatic species, including tiny cricket frogs (about the size of a quarter). Kleopfer also was excited to discover the carpenter frog—a Tier III species of great conservation need cited in the *Virginia Wildlife Action Plan* (www.bewildvirginia.org), found in the Mattaponi watershed.

During early summer, volunteers with the Virginia Herpetological Society conducted surveys and identified a long list of other critters. A handful were newly confirmed for occurring here: the green treefrog, the Northern brownsnake, the six-lined racerunner among them, according to DGIF biologist Susan Watson. That information, along with data collected by DGIF staff, will be fed into the Fish & Wildlife Service database and added to over time.

Hughes looks forward to the results of more complete surveys on the birds, amphibians, and plant communities on site before making long-term management decisions. Sportsmen and other visitors are asked to help fill in our knowledge gap by recording wildlife seen while at the management area via survey forms at the access gates (see photo inset).



Several species of frogs, such as the cricket frog, inhabit the area; they are good indicators of a healthy environment.

Wide Appeal for Recreation

Throughout the management area, roads of easy to moderate grade invite hunters and birders and hikers alike. Vehicle access is limited to designated parking areas, so visitors venture forth by foot and hunters must carry their harvested game out. At this time, horseback riding is not allowed.

Plans for river access by small boats, canoes, and kayaks are underway via a put-in at the WMA and a take-out approximately four to five miles downstream.

The expansive scale of the property adds to the tranquility of the experience and great birding opportunities—prairie warblers and yellow-breasted chats in cutover areas, to ovenbirds and prothonotary warblers in bottomlands, to wood thrush and tanagers (both summer and scarlet) in the upland pine-hardwood forest, for example. It also helps the visitor imagine this land during another era, to form a mental image—however fleeting—of what native Virginians encountered as they moved their encampments from coastal villages to the wooded uplands where the Coastal Plain and Piedmont co-exist. In the quiet, with evidence of wild animals all about, you may develop a renewed appreciation for the intertwining of Virginia's rich cultural and natural history.

Magazine editor Sally Mills enjoys any opportunity to visit the Department's wildlife management areas.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Directions, Map, Access Permit
Details: www.dgif.virginia.gov/wmas



DGIF herpetologist J.D. Kleopfer and field technician Ryan Niccoli check traps during a recent amphibian survey.



A photograph of a person wearing a cap and a backpack, working in a field of tall, dense wetland grasses. The person is seen from the side, looking down at the vegetation. The grasses are tall and green, with some brown stalks visible. The background is a dense thicket of similar vegetation.

Wet Prairies and Calcareous Muck Fens!

by Marie Majarov

Get ready for some intriguing natural history. “Wet prairies” and “calcareous muck fens”—both extremely rare wetland habitats—are being studied, preserved, and protected right here in Northern Virginia.

The work is taking place on 50 acres in an exceptional one-mile strip of land situated half in Frederick County and half in the City of Winchester near the headwaters of Abrams Creek. Abrams is a small stream that flows for a mere 11 miles across farmland, next to a railroad track, past suburban homes, and through the City of Winchester proper, before meandering across the Shenandoah University (SU) Campus and entering Opequon Creek and, eventually, the Potomac.

Long known to local naturalists as exceptional, and to birders as a hot spot, this property was to most area residents simply “the field by the railroad tracks.” In 1980 the Division of Natural Heritage of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (Heritage), as part of its mission to conserve Virginia’s biodiversity, began examining the ecological communities located in this most inauspicious place. They found it to be one of the most biologically rich sites in Virginia!

Muskrats, mink, fox, deer, otters, herons, ducks, songbirds, turtles, salamanders, fish, and butterflies are among the diverse fauna calling these wetlands home. Local naturalist Jim Smith has recorded over 180 bird species, both migrants and residents. There are 18 state-rare plants known from the Abrams Creek watershed and 12 more are on the watch list.

Two species, the delicate July-blooming hooded skullcap (*Scutellaria galericulata*) and profuse fall-blooming willowleaf asters (*Aster praeltus*), are found nowhere else in the state. After a 1993 visit, Heritage recommended that further studies be undertaken to increase our understanding and to aid in the preservation of this distinctive wetland.

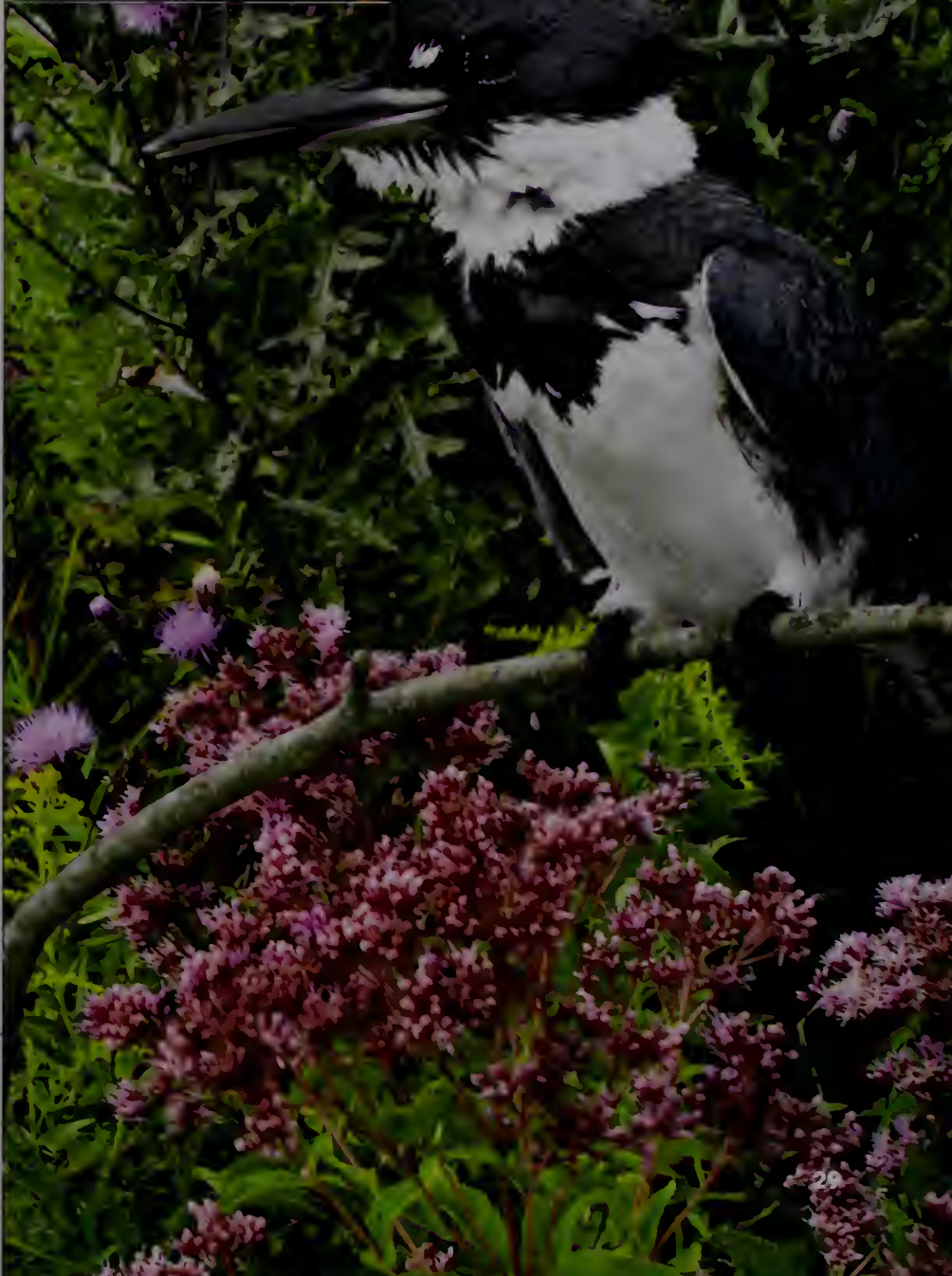
Abrams Creek Wetlands

An environmental studies student in the tall wetland grasses works on a plants inventory.

©Marie Majarov



©Marie Majarov



©Marie Majarov

Above, Abrams Creek wetlands are the only location where hooded skullcap (*Scutellaria galericulata*) is found in Virginia. Right, willowleaf asters (*Aster praeltus*) light up a marsh with pale purple flowers.

Natural History

Wetlands are swamps, marshes, bogs, fens, and shallow ponds where surface water collects or ground water, via springs and seeps, rises to the surface. These ecologically invaluable environments support a rich variety of specialized plant life that can trap sediment and break down harmful substances. Acting like super sponges, wetlands are capable of holding up to 360,000 gallons of water per acre during a foot-deep flood—preventing, or at least reducing, erosion and flooding impacts to nearby streams. During droughts, this water is slowly released and helps replenish waterways.

Most important, wetlands provide essential food and habitat for a wide range of native fauna. Estimates are that nearly half of all federally threatened and endangered species depend upon them for feeding, nesting, breeding, or rearing their young.

The Abrams Creek wetlands, in particular, are a remarkable place of survival and refuge. Some scientists speculate that between 8,500 and 4,000 years ago, during periods of great drought referred to as the “hypsihermal interval,” plants from the wetter parts of our vast midwestern prairies moved eastward across the Mississippi into the Appalachian Mountains. Remnant assemblages of these plants continue to live and

thrive at Abrams Creek. They form communities very similar to contemporary “wet prairies” of the Midwest, with species such as willowleaf asters, big bluestem and Indian grasses taller than people at full height, and Torrey’s rush.

While not so beautiful sounding, calcareous muck fens covering much of the Abrams Creek wetlands are actually lovely, calcium-rich marshes having a specialized, neutral soil (most wetland habitats are acidic) resulting from a combination of decaying plant material and buffering minerals from underlying limestone formations. Fed by cold springs and seeps, these fens were perfect for northern plant refugees escaping southward after the last glacier advance 16,000 years ago. Examples include water horsetail, hooded skullcap, and spotted Joe-Pye weed.

At one time, according to ecologist Gary Fleming with Heritage, the Abrams Creek wetlands were probably part of a much larger complex of calcareous Shenandoah Valley wetlands. Agriculture and urban development in the valley’s fertile, level landscape have wiped out most of this complex, leaving only a few scattered fragments which we are in serious danger of losing altogether.

Research and Preservation

Pivotal to the step-by-step conservation efforts to save these special wetlands was the arrival of environmental studies professor Woodward Bousquet to Shenandoah University. On an introductory walk with Smith, Bousquet recognized the enormous ecological and educational value of the wetlands and embarked upon assembling a dynamic partnership for saving them. The partnership includes the University’s Blue Ridge Institute for Environmental Studies (BRIES), Heritage, The Opequon Watershed, Winchester Green Circle Committee, local naturalists, city and county officials and agencies, the Virginia Native Plant Society, area developers, and this Department (DGIF).

Believing in “hands-on education and service-learning,” Bousquet took his students afield to learn ecological research skills and to make practical contributions with plant and water quality surveys. Under his watchful eye, students learned to prepare the relevés (REL-ě-vāys) that Heritage uses for inventorying vegetation of natural areas. Relevés are sampling plots for garnering detailed observations and data about topography, bedrock, moisture, soil, and human disturbances, and for describing the vegetation’s composition.



©Marie Majarov

Dr. Bousquet (R) and environmental studies students lay out a relevé. Bousquet and students hope to publish a full survey of the wetlands plants in 2014.

Bousquet has a special flair for inspiring passion in his students, who respond with hard work and creative ideas. A 150-page report (cited here) was widely distributed; findings were added to the Heritage database; presentations were made to Winchester City Council, Frederick County Board of Supervisors, and the Virginia Academy of Science. Students hosted more than 90 people on an interpretive nature walk.

With the data increasingly demonstrating the property’s unique ecological value, developers soon took action and donated 25 Winchester acres to the city for permanent preservation. Formally named the Abrams Creek Wetland Preserve in 2003, the property with a walking path became the first mile included in the Winchester Green Circle.

A Problem Solved

While much was coming together for the conservation of the preserve, nature was crafting a major obstruction—and a potential ending—for these wetlands. Through the natural process of succession, native sycamore, green ash, Eastern cottonwood, and silky dogwood were invading vigorously and turning sunny marshes into shady swamps!

Fire, the naturally occurring element keeping the vast midwestern prairies from succeeding to forests, was not a feasible control method in this urban setting. Grazing cattle presented drawbacks, too. Pesticides, herbicides, and the pulling out of trees would devastate these habitats.

The DGIF played an advisory role, as it



©Marie Majarov

National park-style interpretive signs have been put into place across the wetlands to educate visitors about their value and biodiversity.



The ACWP includes the first mile on the Winchester Green Circle, a walking path and bridge strategically placed for low environmental impact.

often does in such projects. Department wetlands specialist David Norris and biologist Fred Frenzel prescribed an ongoing method of cutting down the offending trees, followed by an environmentally safe treatment to the stumps to prevent further growth, and regular follow-up removal of sprouting suckers.

In 2007 after years of study, Bousquet and management team finalized their recommendations. A plan was approved to guide the Winchester Parks and Recreation Department in managing the preserve. In Frederick County, developers proffered protective buffer zones to conserve that portion of the property.

Education and the Future

Researchers at the SU Environmental Studies Department and BRIES continue their conservation efforts both on the SU campus, which is part of the Abrams Creek watershed, and at the preserve. Subsequent classes of SU Environmental Studies students contribute their time, sweat equity, and creative ideas, while field and laboratory research continue to contribute, update, and replicate data.

Recognizing the need to increase awareness and to make information about local natural places available to the public, the students undertook supplemental projects. In 2006, a booklet, *Taking Care of the Abrams Creek Wetlands: Tips for Homeowners, Landscapers and Businesses*, was published. It covers such topics as handling stormwater runoff, soil erosion, use of pesticides, invasive species, and building home rain gardens.

A website (www.su.edu/su-bries) was created to make accessible information about the preserve, area watersheds, research projects, natural places, environmental resources, and SU efforts to reduce their own environmental footprint. Here you can find details of the research, student reports, the Winchester Green Circle, and contributions of area developers noted in this feature, as well as directions to the preserve.

The ongoing conservation of the Abrams Creek wetlands under the caring attention of Dr. Bousquet and his students, along with outstanding partners, is an amazing accomplishment. Dr. Bousquet feels strongly that "getting close to nature can and needs to happen in our local communities, neighborhoods, and parks as well as in wildlife



Torrey's rush (*Juncus torreyi*) is one of the 18 Virginia rare-listed plants found at the wetlands.

management areas and national wildlife refuges." These wetlands will provide essential opportunities for youth and people of all ages to learn about and take in the beauty of nature for many years to come.

However, the most significant contribution in the Abrams Creek wetlands conservation effort might well be the talented students who are being launched into vital careers to become our future environmental stewards. ☛

Virginia Master Naturalist Marie Majarov (www.majarov.com) lives in Winchester with husband Milan. Both nature enthusiasts are active in the Virginia and the Mason-Dixon outdoor writers assoc.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Department of Conservation and Recreation, Division of Natural Heritage: www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage/mission.shtml
- Shenandoah University's Blue Ridge Institute for Environmental Studies: www.su.edu/su-bries
- *A Study of Abrams Creek-White's Pond Wetlands*, Winchester and Frederick County, Virginia by W.S. Bouquet, K.R. Barnes, G.J. Baruffi, K.B. Bryant, J.P. Keffer, and S.M. Vogel. Published by Blue Ridge Institute for Environmental Studies, Environmental Studies Program, Shenandoah University, Winchester VA, 1999.
- Virginia Native Plant Society: www.vnps.org



Naturalist Jim Smith leads regular spring and fall walks at ACWP, which is also a site for the Audubon Christmas Bird Count.



Celebrating Our Successes

by Cristina Santiestevan

*Habitat loss. Pollution.
A changing climate.
The threats sometimes
seem too much to
overcome. But, some
species do. Some species
recover from
near-extinction, often
with the help of state and
federal wildlife agencies
and biologists.*

It may be difficult to imagine today, but the state of Virginia was once entirely without white-tailed deer. It's true. Also beaver. And, probably, wild turkey. All three species were common when settlers first established Jamestown on the shores of the James River. And, in the following centuries, all three species were driven to the point of extinction or near-extinction within the state. Yet, today, these species are widespread across the entire commonwealth.

Deer and beaver and turkey are not alone. Across the globe, wild species decline for numerous reasons: habitat loss and destruction, chemical contamination, pollution, over-collection, competition or predation from introduced species, rising seas, the loss of important prey species, and more. Sometimes, these species never recover. But, sometimes, they do.

While the causes for decline are numerous, the reasons for recovery are often more limited in scope. According to Chris Burkett, Wildlife Action Plan coordinator with the Department (DGIF), wild species recover from population declines when their immediate threat is removed or reduced, and they

have access to suitable habitat, have not already declined to the point where inbreeding would be an issue, and are fairly adaptable in their needs and habits. Of these requirements, Burkett believes habitat is the most important. "You can have all the breeding individuals you want, but if you don't have anywhere for them to live, then all you have is a zoo," he maintains.

Habitat, adaptability, and a suitably large breeding population: These three ingredients may not address every conservation need for every vulnerable species, but they represent an essential start. "Generally speaking," says Burkett, "if you have habitat, you have opportunity for the species. And, if you've got a breeding population, you have hope."

Bald eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Historical status in Virginia: Nearly extinct.

Current status in Virginia: Recovered.

The threat: Declining water quality affected habitat and food supplies. Widespread use of DDT significantly reduced breeding success.

Be Wild! Live Wild! Grow Wild!



The solution: Federal designation as endangered on the Endangered Species List. Habitat improvement, supported by the Clean Water Act. Federal ban on the use of DDT.

In Virginia and across the United States, the bald eagle's decline and recovery is closely tied with the rise and fall of DDT use. The chemical — once used widely in the United States as an agricultural pesticide — caused eagles and other birds to lay eggs with thin and brittle shells. These eggshells were so thin that the weight of the incubating parent could crush the egg, killing the developing chick. Prior to the use of DDT, bald eagles typically raised and fledged 1.6 nestlings each year. After DDT use became widespread, this success rate dropped to just 0.2 surviving chicks for each nesting attempt. DDT was banned in 1972, and bald eagles were listed as an endangered species in 1973. Today, bald eagles enjoy a rate of nesting success that matches historic levels; in 2005, bald eagles successfully fledged an average of 1.59 chicks per nest.

Those success rates translated into real population growth. The Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William and Mary estimates that Virginia had just 30 breeding pairs of bald eagles in the early 1970s. Since then, the population has rebounded dramatically. Today, more than 730 eagle pairs nest in the state.

The bald eagle is a remarkable success story in Virginia and the bird will be officially removed from the state list of threatened and endangered species on January 1, 2013. "They're showing up in places we never would have expected," says Burkett, who is enthusiastic about the bald eagle's recovery. "We've got bald eagles showing up in the western part of Virginia. Historically, they would have been more restricted to the big rivers of eastern Virginia, so to find them using reservoir habitats in western Virginia is exciting. All they needed was a little bit of habitat and a little bit of help."

Beaver

Castor canadensis

Historical status in Virginia: Extinct.

Current status in Virginia: Recovered.

The threat: Over-trapping for pelts.

The solution: Reintroduction of beavers from other states. Management as a game species.

"We just couldn't ship enough beaver pelts to Europe," says Burkett, who explains that beaver pelts were an important part of the export economy for the colonies and early United States. "A lot of trappers would just move into a watershed and remove every beaver there, and then move on."

The last beaver was trapped and killed in Virginia sometime between 1885 and 1911. Then, until 1932, there were simply no beaver in the entire state. That changed in 1932, when the Virginia Game Commission — now the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries — began purchasing live beavers from states with wild populations. In total, the state acquired 35 beavers from Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, and Pennsylvania and released them into nine Virginia counties: Augusta, Chesterfield, Craig, Cumberland, Dinwiddie,

Giles, Goochland, Montgomery, and Prince George.

By 1943, the original 35 beavers had established large enough populations to permit restocking elsewhere in the state. Then, in 1953, the state determined the beaver population had recovered enough to support a limited trapping season. That year, 30 beaver were trapped in five counties. Today, the species has spread to every county in the state, and continues to be managed by DGIF as a furbearing game species.

Black bear

Ursus americanus

Historical status in Virginia: Nearly extinct.

Current status in Virginia: Recovered.

The threat: Habitat loss and over-hunting for food and pelts.

The solution: Habitat restoration, including federal- and state-funded reforestation projects. Management as a game species.

In 1607 when settlers first colonized Jamestown, black bears were common and widespread throughout Virginia. But, centuries of deforestation and unregulated hunt-

(cont. pg. 35)



©John R. Ford

Act Wild

Want to help protect and restore wild species in Virginia? Here are three simple ways to get involved.

1. Read the label. Over-application of chemical pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers contributes to water pollution and negative impacts to species and their habitats. Burkett urges Virginia residents to read labels carefully, and to time their application so that it does not immediately precede a rainstorm, which increases the risk of dangerous runoff.

2. Volunteer. The statewide Virginia Master Naturalist program offers many opportunities for state residents to contribute to habitat restoration projects, public education efforts, and more.

Visit www.virginiamasternaturalist.org for more information.



©Ann & Rob Simpson

3. Support DGIF. Many statewide conservation efforts are managed through the Department. Your donations—whether made directly to DGIF or through the purchase of a fishing or hunting license—support habitat restoration and wildlife conservation efforts statewide. For more information visit www.dgif.virginia.gov/donate.

©Eric Rutherford

ing took a toll on the species. By 1900, black bears had nearly disappeared from the state; remnant populations in the western mountains and the Dismal Swamp were all that remained.

"Before there was a fish and game department, you could shoot anything you saw. And people did," says Burkett, who credits state wildlife agencies with many conservation successes over the years, including the recovery of the black bear in Virginia. "I found one interesting reference in Linzey's *Mammals of Virginia* where he talks about hundreds of black bears being taken out of the Dismal Swamp every year. You think, 'that can't be right.' But, apparently, it was."

Shortly after the turn of the last century, conditions began to improve for black bears here. In 1911, Virginia established its first national forest near Mt. Rogers in the southwestern corner of the state. This was followed by the creation of the Natural Bridge National Forest, the Jefferson National Forest, and the Shenandoah National Forest, now known as the George Washington National Forest. Then, in 1930, black bears were listed as a game species and statewide hunting was restricted to a set season. Today, thanks to the combination of increased habitat and proper harvest management, black bears have reclaimed much of their historic range.

Peregrine falcon

Falco peregrinus

Historical status in Virginia: Likely extinct.

Current status in Virginia: Threatened, but recovering.

The threat: Widespread use of DDT significantly reduced breeding success. Over-collection for falconry.

The solution: Federal designation as endangered on the Endangered Species List. Federal ban on the use of DDT. Captive breeding and reintroduction into the wild.

Although their historic range extends throughout North America, peregrine falcons have never been common. Prior to World War II, approximately 400 breeding pairs nested in the eastern half of the United States. Then, during the following decades, the peregrine falcon population dropped precipitously. By 1964, there was not a single nesting pair of peregrines in the eastern population. Peregrine falcons were listed as an endangered species in 1970.

As with bald eagles, the greatest threat to peregrine falcons was the widespread use of DDT. Although the adult birds could breed and lay eggs, they could not successfully hatch chicks; the eggshells were too brittle and would break during the course of incubation. And, like bald eagles, peregrine falcons have recovered dramatically since DDT was banned in 1972. By 1997, the eastern population numbered 174 breeding pairs. In 1999, peregrine falcons were removed from the Endangered Species List.

Despite their overall recovery in the United States, peregrine falcons remain listed as a threatened species under the Virginia Endangered Species Act. The state launched its peregrine falcon restoration project in 1978,

The solution: Reintroduction of wild turkeys from other states. Habitat restoration. Management as a game species.

"In the mid-part of the 20th century, the agency decided we wanted to have turkeys back," says Burkett, who explains that wild turkeys were originally extirpated from the state through a combination of unregulated hunting and habitat loss. "So, we went out and went to other states, acquired turkeys, and worked to restore habitat. We closely monitored and managed the population, and now we have turkeys throughout the state."

Wild turkeys were an important food and income source for early Virginia settlers and through the 19th century. The birds were



©Tommy Kirkland

when biologists released five chicks on Cobb Island in Northampton County. Since then, the state's breeding population has increased to approximately 25 pairs, almost all of which are nesting in coastal habitats. State biologists are now focused on maintaining a stable breeding population in the coastal region, while simultaneously reestablishing a breeding population in the western mountains.

Wild turkey

Meleagris gallopavo

Historical status in Virginia: Nearly extinct.

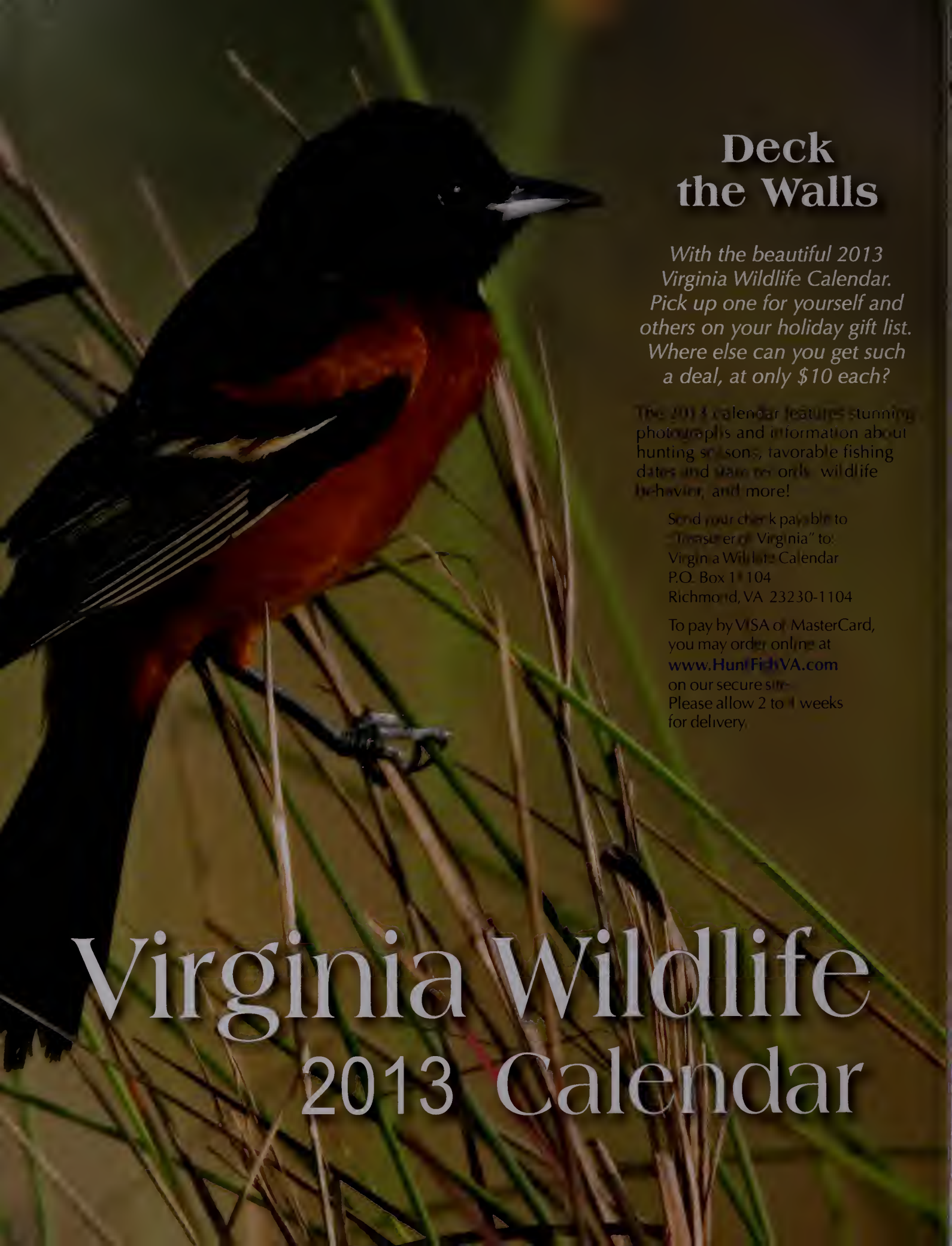
Current status in Virginia: Recovered.

The threat: Habitat loss and over-hunting.

heavily hunted until they nearly disappeared from the state around the beginning of the 20th century. Habitat loss contributed to the birds' decline. Turkeys are forest dwellers and declined throughout the state as forests were cleared to make way for farms.

The recovery of wild turkeys in Virginia mirrors the recovery of black bears. Both species readily repopulated areas as forests returned to protected lands and abandoned farmsteads. Today, wild turkeys are found throughout the state and are managed as a popular game species. 🦃

Cristina Santiestevan writes about wildlife and the environment from her home in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains.



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AFIELD AND AFLOAT



Outdoor Classics

by
Beth Herter

Meditations On Hunting

José Ortega y Gasset

Wilderness Adventures Press, Inc.

Hard cover. \$39.95

Illustrated by Brett James Smith

www.wildadvpress.com; 866-400-2012

"Natural selection has directly created the most subtle and delicate aspects of thought, passion, and art. We have gradually accepted human hands and legs as those of the hunter. Now we are ready to find in our heads the mind of the hunter: the development of human memory as a connecting transformer between time and space, derived from the movement of hunter and gatherer through a landscape."

—Introduction: Paul Shepard,
Visiting Professor of Environmental
Perception, Dartmouth College

As we enter the winter season of contemplation, bidding farewell to 2012, I want to close out the year with a true classic, a book that examines the regions of philosophy, history, and human nature to explore the question: Why do we hunt?

Why do you hunt? Ask five or six of your hunting or fishing friends this question, and you're likely to get five or six different combinations of answers: a reverence for hunting and the desire to pass on the knowledge, family tradition, the desire to prepare and eat healthy meals from wild game, the joy of working in tandem with a well-trained hunting dog, or perhaps the longing to leave the mundane behind to bond with the natural world.

Why is the hunting experience different from other outdoor endeavors? It's about deliberate and purposeful engagement with

wilderness and the places where game are found. To Ortega's mind, hunting is a fundamental instinct rooted in our innermost nature.

José Ortega y Gasset was born in Madrid in 1883, and became one of Spain's leading philosophers. A man of deep curiosity and wide-ranging intellect, he was also a writer and publisher and critical thinker weighing in on the important social, political, and cultural issues of his day. *Meditations on Hunting* is widely quoted in sporting literature; yet I wonder how many hunters actually own this touchstone volume.

Ortega's meditations resonate today. Take the topic of outdoor ethics for example: The Department's statewide Hunter Education curriculum has an extensive chapter devoted to ethics, and many of our volunteer hunter education instructors describe personal ethics as "the way you behave when you think no one is looking." In other words, doing the right thing must first originate from sincerity of heart and mind—not from a fear of getting caught.

With this in mind, I'll close with an excerpt which I hope will persuade you to seek out this book in 2013. An enduring treasure, it will reward the reader with countless pleasant hours of reflection.

"A good hunter's way of hunting is a hard job which demands much from man: he must keep himself fit, face extreme fatigues, accept danger. It involves a complete code of ethics of the most distinguished design; the hunter who accepts the sporting code of ethics keeps his commandments in the greatest solitude, with no witnesses or audience other than the sharp peaks of the mountain, the roaming cloud, the stern oak, the trembling juniper, and the passing animal."

Annual Budget for Fiscal Year 2013:

Detailed information about the
Department's annual budget may be
viewed here:

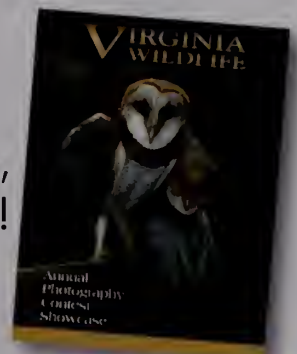
[www.dgif.virginia.gov/about/
financial-summary/2013/](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/about/financial-summary/2013/)

Christmas BIRD COUNT



Dec. 14, 2012–Jan. 5, 2013

www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/

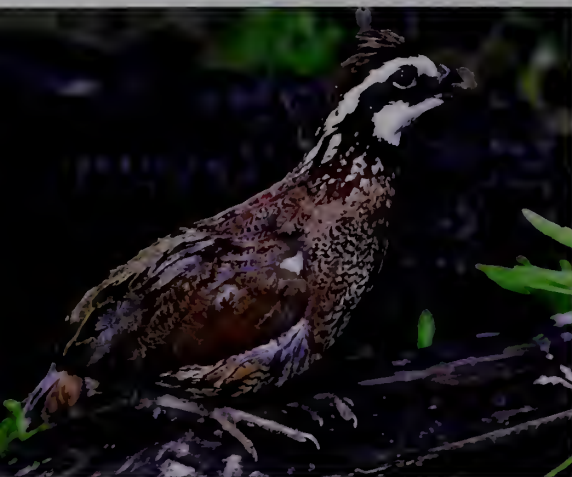


ATTENTION, SHUTTERBUGS!

Don't become a couch potato this season. Grab your camera and get outdoors! You only have three months left to capture that award-winning photograph you plan to submit to the annual photography contest.

As a reminder, the contest deadline is **February 1, 2013** and the showcase of winners will be published in the July-August 2013 issue. Go to: www.dgif.virginia.gov/virginia-wildlife and click on "Photography Contest Guidelines" for everything you need to know to enter.

Good luck!



Dwight Dyke

Keeping the Fire Lit

Quail season opens in a few weeks, but for most quail hunters it's not cause for a lot of anticipation. Bird numbers are at historic lows, and as many of you know, the Department's Quail Action Plan is a serious effort to address the population decline head-on. The Wildlife Foundation of Virginia is working with the Department on our 2,000-acre property in Albemarle County to implement land management practices that establish good quail habitat. We've planted lespedeza, partridge pea, and native warm-season grasses to provide food and cover. We are managing hardwood and pine stands with a regime of improvement cuts and fire to provide savannah habitat that favors small game. When the birds come back, we'll be ready for them.

But, will the folks who love to work behind their dogs and watch a covey rise with gun in hand be there to enjoy the fruits of these efforts? A component of the action plan is to make sure the quail hunting population remains viable over the near term, as projects to bring the birds back are implemented. This fall and winter, The Wildlife Foundation of Virginia will try to play a role.

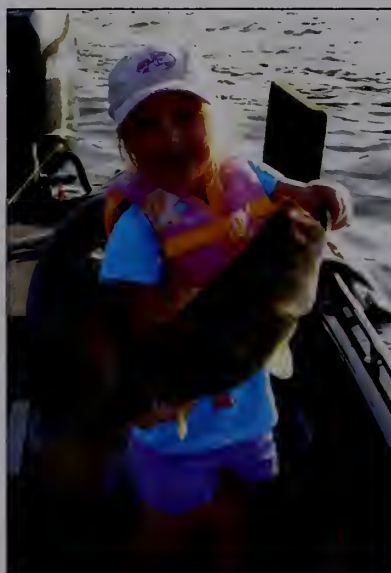
As a pilot program, we've released 500 birds at Fulfillment Farms. Over the next few months, we're going to provide controlled public hunting opportunities. We are doing this to allow quail hunters an opportunity to hunt the bird in a natural environment, and to keep their fire lit. We're also doing it to light some new fires. We'll be hosting youth hunts to introduce kids to this remarkable sport. And, we're doing it for the bird dogs that need a place to stretch their legs, sharpen their noses, and have success in the field. If we can retain a few folks who might otherwise have retired their favorite dog, or if we can recruit a few new hunters who will carry the quail hunting torch for a while, then, when the birds are back, we'll be ready for them.

*Jenny West
Executive Director
The Wildlife Foundation of Virginia*

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Paid Distribution by Other Classes Through USPS	58	59
Total Paid Distribution	28,129	27,480
Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Included on PS Form 3541	1,909	1,924
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Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through USPS	70	60
Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail	706	597
Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution	2,685	2,581
Total Distribution	30,814	30,061
Copies Not Distributed	2,731	3,439
Total	33,545	33,500
Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation	91%	91%



First place, Ages 6-10 - Madison, Age 6

2012 Kids 'N Fishing Photo Contest



First place, Ages 1-5 - Josiah, Age 4

Aww... congratulations to the winners of the 2012 Contest!

ATTENTION YOUNG WRITERS

Don't let the cold weather stifle your creativity! Grab your laptop or a piece of paper and get to work. The Virginia Outdoor Writers Association annually sponsors two writing competitions for Virginia high school students (grades 9-12) and undergraduate students attending a Virginia college or university. Awards of gift certificates, outdoors gear, and cash are offered for winning entries.

Go to www.vowa.org for contest guidelines and other details. But hurry! The deadline is February 7, 2013.

Once again it is time to acknowledge and thank DGIF staff from all corners of the state who help us bring this magazine to our readers. Your feature contributions, reviews, and edits – often under tight deadlines – are very much appreciated by the entire magazine staff. Thank you!

—Sally Mills, Editor

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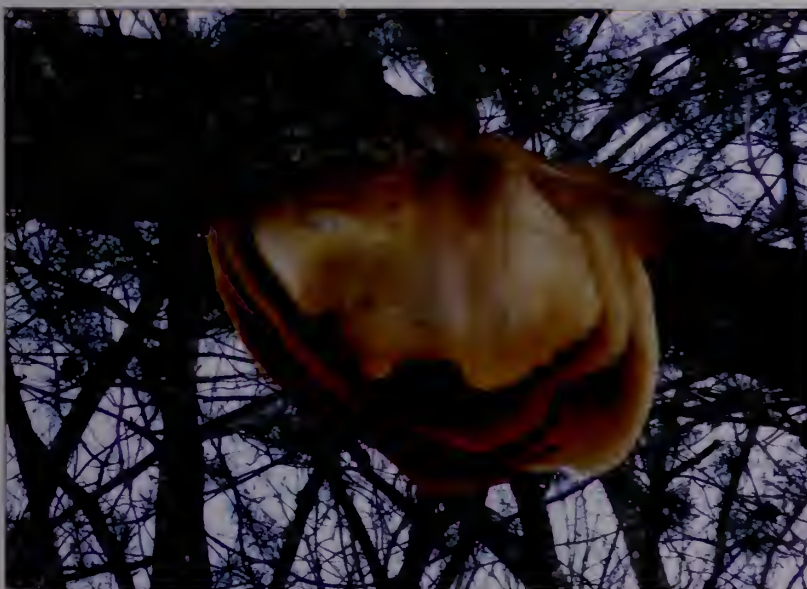
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IMAGE OF THE MONTH



Congratulations go to Henry Craig of Edinburg for his unusual photograph of a wild beehive spotted out in the open behind his house. It was located approximately 25 feet up and taken with a Panasonic DMC-TZ5 Lumix digital camera last January. Henry captured this image at these settings: ISO 125, 1/125th, f/4.9. A honey of a shot, Henry! Thanks for sharing!

You are invited to submit one to five of your best photographs to "Image of the Month," Virginia Wildlife Magazine, P.O. Box 11104, 4010 West Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23230-1104. Send original slides, super high-quality prints, or high-res jpeg, tiff, or raw files on a disk and include a self-addressed, stamped envelope or other shipping method for return. Also, please include any pertinent information regarding how and where you captured the image and what camera and settings you used, along with your phone number. We look forward to seeing and sharing your work with our readers.



It is around 9 o'clock, Sunday morning. There's a knock on my door and Ol' Jones tells me he is headed north across the James and wants to know if I would like to tag along. Now if there is one thing I love as much as retrieving it is a ride in Ol' Jones's truck. He has got the inside looking the way the interior of a pickup *should* look. A quarter-inch coating of road dust covers the dashboard, the smell of wet dog is saturated into the upholstery, and empty Vienna sausage tins stuffed with discarded nab wrappers rolling around on the floor give our truck a certain 'panache' that says we are men of the open road.

It turns out that Ol' Jones has gotten tired of squirrels robbing his bird feeders and stealing cherries off his cherry trees and has decided to transport them to another piece of property he owns in the country where they will not interrupt the tranquility of his feathered friends.

As I sit in the extended cab, I see Ol' Jones hurriedly coming to the truck, tossing from one hand to the other what looks like a chicken wire cage in the shape of a ball. Inside the cage is an obviously angry squirrel that is just itching to latch onto one of Ol' Jones's fingers—explaining the reason for the juggling act.

"What kind of trap is that?" I ask.

"Made it myself," says Ol' Jones proudly. "Cost next to nothing but I can see a couple of design flaws that need to be worked out."

With that, Ol' Jones places the cage containing the highly agitated squirrel on the floor in front of the passenger seat. Already I can see that having a squirrel rolling around in a cage shaped like a ball doesn't do anything for its personality.

As we head west down Route 60, Ol' Jones pops in one of what he calls his "trav'l'n CDs." These are a mix of recordings by Jerry Jeff Walker, Dwight Yoakum, and Delbert McClinton. Jones also has thrown in a little Andrew Lloyd Weber and Puccini just to mess with people who think they can stereotype him. He likes to watch their reaction after McClinton finishes

"Same Kind of Crazy as Me" and Puccini's "Nessun Dorma" kicks in.

Ironically, it was in the middle of Yoakum's "Turn It On, Turn It Up, Turn Me Loose" that the squirrel—unbeknown to us—was working on an escape plan with his sharp, shell-cracking teeth and busted free. I feel some warm furry thing brush past by my hindquarters and then see it scamper to the fold-up back seat and run alongside the top of it a few times, looking for a way out.

Now I don't know if you have been around dogs and squirrels at the same time, but there is something about a squirrel on the loose that will make even a Pomeranian pup go crazy. I start lurching back and forth frantically, trying to retrieve the hairy rodent. Ol' Jones doesn't have a clue we have an escaped prisoner on our hands until it scoots under the driver's seat, jumps on the passenger seat, then hops to the top of the dashboard where it runs back and forth from right to left, then left to right—like some kind of interior windshield wiper. There is no place for us to pull over and while Ol' Jones is driving with one hand, he is trying to restrain a 95-pound Labrador from leaping across the center console.

When the squirrel leaps to the steering wheel, Ol' Jones makes a grab to protect his digits and I make my move to grab the squirrel. When I came flying through, I must of bumped Ol' Jones pretty hard because we suddenly veer into the entrance of a fast food place. Fortunately it is one that is never open on Sunday.

I just about have the rascal cornered around the gas pedal when the squirrel spots an avenue of escape and heads north up Ol' Jones's pants leg. Ol' Jones lets out a remarkably high-pitched "WHOOOP!!!" and slams his feet on both the brake and the gas pedal at the same time. We circle the drive-through three times, leaving a trail of tire smoke like those burn-outs you see the NASCAR boys do when they have won a race.

It is about this time—when Jerry Jeff breaks into "I Ain't Living Long Like This"—that the squirrel reaches a dead-end at Jones's belt buckle, makes a U-Turn and heads south down the other pants leg, comes out, spots me waiting for him, and reverses direction—seeking safety up Ol' Jones's pants leg again. Ol' Jones lets out another a cappella "WHOOOP" and calls upon every higher powered deity he can think of to deliver him from this sharp clawed beast doing a Riverdance impression up and down the inside of his trousers.

While Ol' Jones is having his own impromptu tent revival, screaming all sorts of exclamations and promises of where he will be next Sunday if he can just be freed from this unholy situation, I have zeroed in on the moving bulge on Jones's right thigh. Ol' Jones sees I am about to take drastic action, skids to a stop, and bails out of the truck, taking the squirrel with him. While unbuckling his pants, Ol' Jones simultaneously does what looks like a combination Irish jig and chicken dance. As Ol' Jones's pants fall to his ankles, the squirrel sees freedom, leaps off of Jones's leg, and scampers up a telephone pole. He leaves Ol' Jones standing there taking a bodily inventory and looking at his bloodied legs, which appear to have been run through a dull paper shredder.

Ol' Jones is in need of some medical attention, but there are some things you just don't share with your family doctor. We turn the truck east and head home, listening to the last refrain of Dwight Yoakum's "Inside the Pocket of a Clown."

Keep a leg up,
Luke

Luke is a black Labrador retriever who spends his spare time hunting up good stories with his best friend, Clarke C. Jones. You can contact Luke and Clarke at www.clarkecjones.com.





PHOTO TIPS

by Lynda Richardson

Happy Holiday Gift Ideas For Photographers

As the holidays draw near, we all start thinking about the gifts we will be gathering up for our loved ones. Here are a few photography-related ideas for everyone on your list!

Richmond Camera has offered camera equipment and lab services at various locations around the commonwealth for years. Not only can you buy the latest digital camera, you will find a wide assortment of photo-related gifts as well. On their website, www.richmondcamera.com, I found photobooks, (\$29.99–39.99), calendars, (\$6–20), ceramic tiles (\$6–10), mouse pad (\$8), ornaments, (\$5–10), travel mugs (\$15), iphone 4/4s covers (\$16), photo blankets (fleece \$50, velveteen \$70), and much more. These items allow you to personalize your gift with a favorite photograph. You can order directly from a Richmond Camera location or online. (I can't wait to get my iPhone cover!)

Another cool idea would be to buy an iTunes (for iPhones) or Google Play (for Android) gift card that the recipient could use to purchase phone apps. As you may remember, in recent *Photo Tips* columns I spoke of photography-related apps such as ToonCamera, ProHDR, and the Audubon Field Guide series. I just love my ToonCamera app, and the Audubon Field Guides are awesome for on-the-spot identification of birds, insects, flowers, and more. Apps range from \$0.99 to \$50; most of them are at the lower end of the scale and some are free.

Speaking of gift cards, with all the new photography books coming out on Photo-shop, nature, landscape and portrait photography, HDR techniques, and special photographer's projects, everyone could use a gift card to a bookstore! I recently ogled the latest book by Anup Shah, *Serengeti Spy*, showing his use of a camouflaged camera placed in the path of various African animals that he triggered remotely. (I love remote camera work!) Images show the bellies and hooves of stampeding zebra and inquisitive



If you want to keep your head above water, or snow, plan ahead and get your gifts for the holidays now! Don't forget to look for great photographs to capture.

faces of cheetah, baboons, and lions. Awesome!

Want to buy a game for the entire family? How about *Photo Opoly*? This more personalized version of an old favorite, *Monopoly*, is a do-it-yourself game that uses 22 photographs, titles, and categories that you provide! Great for parties and family reunions, and you can change it to fit any occasion. Barnes & Noble and Amazon carry this for around \$20–40.

For more great gift ideas, check out the Photojojo Store at www.photojojo.com. They have a hilarious assortment of crazy items, from ceramic camera lens shot glasses, to lens bracelets, to camera cookie cutters, to stop watches.

I hope these ideas will help you on your hunt for the best holiday gifts ever! And amid all the hustle and bustle, be sure to take some time to get out and photograph. Happy Shooting!

PHOTO OPPORTUNITY OF THE SEASON

The waterfowl migration will be in full swing, so grab your long lenses and head to Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge for snow and Canada geese as well as a variety of ducks.



Dining In

by Ken and Maria Perrotte

Swift Fox's Slow Cooker Venison

Retired Virginia Army National Guard Col. John Fortune has been bringing the feast to family and friends for decades. Fortune's warrior heritage clearly means a lot to him and aligns with his Native American heritage as a member of Virginia's Rappahannock Tribe.

Fortune's Indian name is "Swift Fox" and he and his wife Wanda "Singing Wind" have spent decades sharing their cultural ancestry at many special events. Part of that includes sharing cuisine. Swift Fox and Singing Wind graciously donned their Rappahannock regalia and cooked some of the staple offerings. John's Army Guard friends have vainly tried to extract the recipe from him for years, but as he explained, "No two batches ever come out just the same and it has involved a lot of experimentation."

He grew up in Central Point of Caroline County, where the family was self-reliant.

"We raised everything, almost never had to go to the store, except to get sugar, coffee, pepper and salt, and we'd often trade eggs for that," he said. "I used to watch mom cook. They didn't have a lot of the ingredients and tools we have today and she used mostly venison, onion, salt and pepper—it was always good." His recipe here carries on his mother's venison tradition.

Ingredients:

- 1 pound boned venison
- 1 cup of table salt
- 1 cup self-rising flour
- 1 tbsp. black pepper
- ½ cup cooking oil (canola)
- 1 tsp. garlic salt
- 3 large onions
- 4 strips bacon
- ½ cup Worcestershire sauce
- ½ cup Texas Pete (or similar) hot sauce

Preparation (the day before):

Ensure the meat is impeccably trimmed, removing all membrane, fat, and silver skin. Brine meat for 24 hours in a bowl of water mixed with 1 cup of salt. Remove and let drain for 15 minutes.

Day of cooking:

Cut meat into 1- to 2-inch cubes. Mix flour, 1 teaspoon of pepper, and garlic salt in a large, ziplock plastic bag. Add venison, close bag, and shake thoroughly. Peel onions and cut into 6 sections. Place cooking oil in slow cooker. Add 2 of the onions. Empty bag of venison into pot. Add remaining onion on top. Add Texas Pete (hot sauce) and Worcestershire sauce. Cover slow cooker and cook on low temperature setting for 4–6 hours. Seasonings can be added to taste before serving, although the hot sauce gives the dish a nice "zip."

Side dish:

Traditional succorash goes well and is very easy to make. Simply add equal parts frozen or fresh kernel corn and lima beans and a can or two (depending on amount of beans and corn) of Ro-Tel tomatoes to a pot and cook until tender. Or, you can get squash, cut into cubes or strips, and steam it with a little bacon fat, onion salt, and pepper.

Footnote:

While John was trimming the venison shoulder and Wanda was cutting up an onion, he smiled at Wanda and said, "You know, in the old days, my part of this would've ended once I brought home the deer. The cutting up and cooking would've been your job." She gave him her best, "Yes, dear!" smile.



Ken Perrotte



Ken Perrotte

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